

Single-person households in Sweden

YSI - Sweden - Country case 2

1. Single-person households in Sweden

Single-person households comprise almost 40 percent of all Swedish households, making it the most common type of household in the country. The proportion of single-person households grew throughout the 20th century, but has remained more or less constant since the early 1990's. The number of single households has been rising as the population has risen. Because the prevalence of single-person households is not a salient issue in the public and political debate, there is little information about the possible reasons for the large share of single-person households and how the situation might develop in the future.

According to Professor Eva Sandstedt, there has been a shift in attitudes towards single households, which are now viewed in an overall positive or neutral light, as opposed to previous skeptical attitudes toward singleness.[1] The term "single" was introduced in the Swedish debate in the 1990's. Previously, single-person households were mostly discussed in terms of living alone, creating a stigmatizing emphasis on loneliness. Today, living alone is widely regarded as a voluntary choice. Because of the current housing deficit, co-living is sometimes forced rather than chosen freely. In large cities, where the lack of housing is especially acute, living alone can therefore even be regarded as a privilege and might even increase social status.[2]

The level of unemployment in Swedish single-person households is roughly equivalent to the national average level of unemployment, with a national unemployment rate of 7 percent and an average of 8 percent amongst single-person households. In this respect, Sweden differs from other Nordic countries, where the unemployment rate amongst people living in single-person households is somewhat higher than the national average. While it is outside the scope of this study to fully determine why this is the case, the large proportion of students in Sweden might partly explain the lower level of unemployment. Unlike many other countries where students mostly cohabit or live with their parents, there is a large proportion of single-households among students in Sweden.

Nevertheless, approximately half of the municipalities with colleges or universities report a housing deficit, particularly small, affordable student apartments. This applies to both municipalities with large cities and smaller towns.[3] While this may result in students co-habiting or remaining with their parents, it is still notable that, unlike most European countries, where the vast majority of students live in shared accommodation, single households among students are largely considered a norm in Sweden.

Sweden is one of few European countries that does not have social housing, which might partly explain the lower levels of unemployment among Swedish single-person households. Despite differences in the system of social housing among European countries, there are similarities regarding target groups and income thresholds. Residents in social housing are often young or old, have low- or middle income, have lower levels of education and are more often immigrants than residents in other kind of dwellings. These differences exist in Sweden as well, even though the public housing system in Sweden is open to all residents. Socio-economically weaker households are overrepresented in Swedish public housing.[4] The fact that single-person households are not a salient issue in Sweden means that there is little information on this. It is also unclear how big a proportion of social housing in other countries are single households.

Overall, there seem to be more similarities than differences between the Nordic countries regarding debate of and policy towards single-person households. The issue is not a salient one in most of the countries, and seems to be under-researched and seldom addressed in policies. Age-structure amongst single-person households also appears highly similar. Initiatives aimed at single-person households often target loneliness and social exclusion and are mostly organised by voluntary groups. Nevertheless, some minor differences can be found. For instance, Dutch policy is not particularly supportive towards young people living alone, while there are Swedish policies that support young people in single-person households. For example, social benefit in the Netherlands is available from the age of 27, whereas in Sweden housing allowances are limited to people under the age of 29.[5] It is possible that there is a more liberal view of single-person households in Sweden, because it has been common for so long, though the impact of this is difficult to determine.

[1] Interview with Eva Sandstedt 02-06-2017.

[2] Interview with Eva Sandstedt 19-10-2017.

[3]

<https://www.boverket.se/sv/samhallsplanering/bostadsplanering/bostadsmarknaden/bostadsmarknadsenkaten-i-kort-het/bostadsmarknaden-for-olika-grupper/studenter/>

[4] Boverket (2016). *Den sociala bostadssektorn i Europa. Jämförelser mellan sex EU-länder*. 2016:16, s. 89.

[5] <https://www.forsakringskassan.se/privatpers/ersattningar-a-o/bostadsbidrag-till-unga-under-29-ar>

2. Immigration and single-person households

Sweden has a relatively high proportion of foreign-born residents, and has experienced a high influx of refugees in recent years. Newly-arrived immigrants have two housing possibilities: they can either choose a municipality in which to settle and find a dwelling on their own, or be assigned to a municipality and dwelling by the Swedish Migration Board. Around 55 percent of newly-arrived immigrants choose the former, often opting to settle in municipalities with larger cities. While there are higher opportunities of finding a job in urban municipalities these also suffer a greater lack of housing. Newly-arrived immigrants who live in urban or suburban

municipalities cities very often rent rooms in apartments or live in otherwise unstable housing conditions.[1] The structure of the Swedish public rental housing system, which requires being on a waiting list, often for several years, makes it difficult to obtain affordable housing. The waiting list for these so-called “first-hand contracts” in large cities is highly problematic, and may also hinder integration. The precarity of the housing market for newly-arrived immigrants can cause additional stress in an already strained existence. In rural areas and municipalities with less housing deficit, newly-arrived immigrants often live in their own apartments, though it remains unclear whether these are mainly in single-person or shared households. The access to housing might explain the increase in the number of newly-arrived immigrants who choose to settle down in rural municipalities.[2]

Housing deficit is one of the greatest obstacles to successful integration for newly-arrived immigrants. Not only is there a lack of housing, but a specific lack of affordable apartments to let. This complicates the housing situation further for many newly-arrived immigrants, who often lack the resources to buy an apartment. For residents who cannot afford to buy their dwelling, renting is the only option. Around 64 percent of immigrants live in rented apartments, compared to 40 percent for residents born in Sweden.[3] The possibility to access the housing market for residents with few resources depend on economic resources and social resources such as knowledge about the housing market, language skills, contacts, references and queuing time in housing queues as well as the availability of dwellings. Newly-arrived immigrants often lack these social resources and many are dependent on economic support. High levels of rent for private rentals as well as income requirements for also makes it harder for newly-arrived immigrants with few economic resources to enter the housing market.[4]

There is little information as to whether there are any differences between the share of single-person households and/or the characteristics of people who live alone amongst immigrants and the general population. Research mainly focuses on living conditions for single-person households and immigrants respectively and the question of immigrants living in single-person households is not addressed specifically. Policies and public debate mostly focuses on the lack of housing and the trouble for municipalities to provide suitable dwellings for newly-arrived immigrants. Research does, however, show that immigrants live in overcrowded housing situations to a greater extent than individuals born in Sweden and that the housing situation for newly-arrived immigrants is particularly difficult. The average living space for newly-arrived immigrants is 22 square meters, as opposed to that of the general population, which is 42 square meters.[5] This could partly be explained by many newly-arrived immigrants being registered at accommodation facilities in the form of apartments, which are generally shared by several households, or at temporary accommodation facilities such as hostels.[6] It could also be explained by many newly-arrived immigrants settling in cities, where overcrowding in general is more common than in rural areas.[7] In municipalities with great housing deficit, many newly-arrived immigrants move around often and stay with relatives, friends or live in other temporary residences, sometimes for years.[8] The share of single-person households among newly-arrived immigrants might be affected by a new temporary law, which impedes family reunion. On the other hand, research shows that newly-arrived immigrants seldom live alone, unless they live in rural areas with good housing possibilities. Especially in larger cities where lack of housing is acute, flat-sharing is more common.[9]

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- [1] Boverket (2015). *Boendesituationen för nyanlända*. 2915:40.
- [2] Boverket (2015). *Boendesituationen för nyanlända*. 2915:40.
- [3] Tankesmedjan Tiden (2015). *Delade städer. Om integration och etableringshinder på bostadsmarknaden*. 2015:3, s. 8–9.
- [4] Boverket (2013). *Etableringshinder för individer och hushåll med svaga resurser*. Dnr: 2102–536/2013, s. 31–33.
- [5] Boverket (2016). *Trångboddheten i storstadsregionerna*. 2016:28.
- [6] <https://skl.se/integrationsocialomsorg/asylochflyktningmottagandeintegration/boendebosattning.7088.html>
- [7] Boverket (2015). *Boendesituationen för nyanlända*. 2915:40, 34–35.
- [8] Boverket (2015). *Boendesituationen för nyanlända*. 2915:40, s. 59–60.
- [9] Boverket (2015). *Boendesituationen för nyanlända*. 2915:40.
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3. Sources

3.1 Persons interviewed

Eva Sandstedt, Professor at Institute for Housing and Urban Research & Professor Emeritus at Department of Sociology, Uppsala University. Interviewed 02-06-2017 & 19-10-2017.

3.2 Written sources

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